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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 010382

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PARM](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: LAVROV'S MIDDLE EAST DIPLOMACY

REF: A. STATE 148157  
[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 3390

Classified By: POL M/C Alice G. Wells: 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With FM Lavrov's September 7-9 trip to the Middle East, promotion of a "universal" peace process, experts' conference, renewed Syria track, and support for the Arab League ministerial session at UNGA, the GOR continues to seek "player" status in the region. Practically, GOR support for UNSC 1701 will be bilateral and limited to an engineering battalion, numbering 300. Lavrov pushed for normalized Lebanon-Syria relations, within the context of Syrian cooperation in the Hariri investigation. Lavrov told the Syrians that the GOR would thoroughly investigate charges that Russian weapons were transferred to Hezbollah, and briefed PM Olmert on this "serious approach." The MFA views a possible Palestinian unity government as vindication of engagement with Hamas, and questioned whether it was practical to expect a new government to simultaneously implement the three conditions for Western recognition. Upcoming visits to Moscow this fall by UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, PM Olmert, and President Mubarak provide opportunities for continued GOR activism. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) In a September 15 meeting, Russian MFA Director for the Middle East and North Africa Sergey Vershinin provided a readout of Foreign Minister Lavrov's whirlwind September 7-9 trip to Beirut, Damascus, Tel Aviv, and Ramallah. Lavrov undertook the swing with two overriding objectives: (1) to spur implementation of 1701 and (2) to assess, in the wake of the Israel-Lebanon war, regional interest in another round of "universal" peace process diplomacy.

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Beirut: Nasrullah, GOR aid, peace process  
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[1](#)3. (C) In Beirut, Lavrov met "with all of Lebanese society" -- specifically, President Sinoria, Nabbi Berri, and FM Sallukh, with a pre-trip telephone call to Saad Hariri, who was out of town. While recognizing the Lebanese Christian argument that Hezbollah's popularity was damaged by the war's destructiveness, the GOR found Nasrallah's star ascendant, and calculated that any dip in domestic support was offset by his improved standing in the Arab world. From a local player, he was transformed into a regional power. Lavrov agreed with Sinoria's assessment that disarming Hezbollah could only be done within a Lebanese political compact, without interference from the international community. Vershinin praised the "mood" among Sinoria and his advisers to push disarmament, but underscored the GOR belief that any "sharp" action would precipitate civil war. It would be an easier process if Hezbollah were an outside force -- if it were a question of blocking Iran or Syria; however, Hezbollah's indigenous standing meant that dialogue would be key to any resolution. Vershinin repeated the GOR's conclusion that there was no significant Iranian choreography

of the war: "ideological closeness, yes; direct commands, never." Iran benefited by the international community's attention towards Lebanon and away from questions of nuclear proliferation, but there was no direct evidence of Iran having masterminded events.

¶4. (C) In response to reftel (A) points on maintaining momentum in Lebanon, Vershinin expressed in careful terms the GOR delegation's dismay over the extent of the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and questioned the intensity of Israeli attacks in the days immediately preceding the ceasefire. He noted that the GOR was committed to full implementation of 1701. While both the GOL and UN requested GOR participation in UNIFIL-2, Russia decided to send up to 300 military sappers/engineers in a bilateral capacity to assist in the reconstruction effort. Finance Minister Kudrin will attend the September 18 WB/IMF discussions in Singapore, but Vershinin signaled that it was unlikely that the GOR would commit to more humanitarian assistance beyond the four cargo loads already provided. Under consideration would be additional de-mining support.

¶5. (C) Noting GOR efforts to encourage direct Lebanese-Syrian negotiations over Shabaa farms would not resolve the broader question of peace between Lebanon and its neighbors, Vershinin said that FM Lavrov believed another "universal" effort aimed at negotiating a comprehensive peace was required, along the lines of the Madrid conference. Vershinin argued that this round of peace should attempt to "attract" Iran to the negotiating table, in order that any negotiated outcome would be stable and enduring. Acknowledging US resistance to this proposal, Vershinin replied that "if Iran has influence, we should work with it." Vershinin pointed to the presence of a million Russian

MOSCOW 00010382 002 OF 003

speakers in Israel, including concentrations under Hezbollah rocket attack in Haifa, as one reason for Russian diplomatic activism. There were numerous Jewish organizations in Russia who sought to deepen GOR engagement in the Middle East.

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Syria: Asad confident, ready to negotiate  
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¶6. (C) The GOR found Asad confident and pragmatic in the aftermath of the war. Asad told the GOR that this should be "the last war" in the Middle East and that Syria sought a universal settlement, wanted peace with Israel, and was ready for contacts and negotiations. The GOR conveyed this to PM Olmert, and interpreted recent GOI actions (reftel B) as indicative that Israel may be preparing a Syria track. Olmert, Vershinin said, was not categorical in ruling out a renewed effort with Syria.

¶7. (C) Asad, Vershinin commented, was realistic about normalizing relations with Lebanon and told the GOR that he was prepared to host Sinoria, although there was no agreement on dates. Vershinin defended high-level engagement with Syria as essential, given that it was an "original" peace process player. If Syria was not constructive, Vershinin argued, nothing substantive could be accomplished. The GOR had pressed Syria to cooperate fully in the Hariri assassination investigation, but Vershinin was non-committal on what message had been passed to Syria on halting support for terrorism against Israel. Vershinin merely stressed that the only GOR-Palestinian contacts on this trip were with Abbas.

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Russian weapons to Hezbollah  
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¶8. (C) The GOR told Syria that it would need to undertake a comprehensive investigation of Russian weapons supplied to the SARG, in order to determine whether there was leakage to

Hezbollah. Syria reacted positively to the investigation, within the context of examining how to revive "normalized" trade relations -- including military-technical ties -- in accordance with international obligations. Vershinin had no details to add on the status of the GOR investigation, except to underscore that the GOR had adopted a "very serious" approach that had been briefed to PM Olmert.

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Israel: Olmert searching for new strategy  
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¶9. (C) Despite the allegations over the illegal arms transfers to Hezbollah, Vershinin insisted that relations with Israel were good, with Russia enjoying a more intensive dialogue with the GOI than with many others in the region. The weapons controversy, he noted, would not derail the October 15 visit of PM Olmert to Moscow, following on the visit by Foreign Minister Livni and an ongoing security channel dialogue. Vershinin again underscored the bilateral component of the relationship, with the over one million former residents of the Soviet Union constituting a "Russian street" that energized relations. The trip will focus on bilateral ties, with Putin having instructed the MFA to develop concrete initiatives rather than organize "just another friendly visit."

¶10. (C) The GOR concluded that Olmert's difficult domestic predicament ultimately will translate into greater receptivity on rejuvenating a universal peace initiative. "Unilateral disengagement is dead," Vershinin commented, and "Olmert is not excluding any alternative policy initiatives at this stage." Olmert told Lavrov that it would be impossible to talk peace without the return of the Israeli soldiers, and requested GOR assistance. Subsequently, Vershinin noted, the GOR talked to the Palestinians, Syrians and Iranians (to no apparent effect, although Putin underscored Russian responsiveness to the GOI request in his mid-September meeting with Western analysts). Since (at least in Russian eyes) Olmert lost militarily, the GOR believes that the Prime Minister is looking for a diplomatic success.

¶11. (C) While Vershinin acknowledged the GOI "allergy" to an international peace conference (with the Israeli Embassy here telling us they threw cold water on the concept), the GOR has decided to read the absence of a categorical rejection as a yellow light for the GOR to continue to flog its proposal. The concept of a conference, Vershinin insisted, resonated in the region. The GOR was not looking for a "one-day show," Vershinin argued, but a beginning of a process that would renew all three tracks to a comprehensive

MOSCOW 00010382 003 OF 003

peace. That said, Vershinin implied that the GOR's alternate proposal, a meeting of international experts first proposed by Putin during his May 2005 Egypt visit, continued to be kicked around within the MFA, despite a similar Israeli cold shoulder.

12. (C) The GOI Embassy tells us that most of the focus of the GOR visit was on Lebanon, although their readout was limited given the preponderance of time spent in a Lavrov-Olmert one-on-one session. They described the visit as less operational, and more an exchange of views, with the GOR pushing for the resumption of a Syria track and demurring on any stationing of international peacekeeping troops along the Syrian border.

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PA: Looking favorably on unity government, AL ministerial  
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¶13. (C) Lavrov's swing through the region has swung the MFA behind the Arab League concept of a ministerial session on the margins of UNGA. It was important, Vershinin said, to

demonstrate to the region that the international community was not indifferent to the long-standing crisis in the region. Vershinin acknowledged that the Quartet meeting on September 20 could play this function, but argued that the meeting would be focused more narrowly on how to respond to the possible unity government between Fatah and Hamas.

¶14. (C) Should a unity government materialize, Vershinin made it clear that the GOR would seek to take credit for the development, which he attributed to open GOR lines of communication with both Fatah and Hamas. Vershinin reiterated that there was no legal impediment to engaging Hamas, since the GOR did not classify the organization a terrorist organization. The Palestinian factions, he maintained, realized that they had reached a dead end and were looking for a way out. Vershinin previewed GOR arguments that would favor easing the requirements for a unity government to be recognized by the international community, arguing that "simultaneous" implementation of all three conditions (to recognize Israel and previously signed peace treaties, as well as to renounce terrorism) was unrealistic. While a unity government would not answer 100 percent of the international community's concerns, Vershinin maintained, it would provide Abbas with the authority he needed to negotiate a way forward. Vershinin took on board our reiteration that all three conditions would need to be satisfied by Hamas before the US could recognize a unity government.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C) Lavrov's whirlwind trip to the region was overshadowed by the visits of PM Blair and UNSYG Annan, but Russian activism will continue. As Russian lobbying for a conference, meeting, and ministerial indicate, the GOR continues to seek "player" status in the Middle East, simultaneously embracing the Quartet process, while promoting an Arab League ministerial to assuage Arab allies. If a Fatah-Hamas unity government becomes a reality, we will continue to press back against GOR instincts to shrink or to accept a phased implementation of the core conditions governing western recognition of Hamas. In addition to the mid-October visit of Olmert, the GOR will host UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed on September 19 and Egyptian President Mubarak on November 2.  
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